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AN UNPUBLISHED LETTER OF ST EPHREM

BY

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In his book *S. Ephraim's Quotations from the Gospels* (1901) the eminent British Syriac scholar F.C. Burkitt drew attention to the existence, in a manuscript in the British Museum, of two extracts from a letter of Saint Ephrem addressed to a certain Publius. Neither the letter itself, nor the addressee, seem to receive mention anywhere else, and so any judgement about its genuineness or otherwise must rest on purely internal grounds. Burkitt himself, on the basis of the archaic character of the Gospel quotations in it, evidently thought that the letter was probably genuine, and he went on to comment that "it is surprising that no one has ever thought it worth while to edit". This task, which still lies undone some seventy years later, I hope to fulfil in the near future.

The unique manuscript containing the extracts from the letter to Publius, BM Add. 7190, was dated by Wright (1) to the twelfth century, and since it contains an extract from St John Climacus it may be of Melkite origin. The contents of the manuscript are very varied, containing extracts by both Greek and Syriac writers, chiefly on ascetic subjects (2). The two extracts from the Letter to Publius run to a dozen odd pages when transcribed, and the shorter of the two contains what may be the opening of the letter, while the longer certainly represents the ending. The letter is essentially a meditation on the last judgement, taking as its starting point

(1) *Catalogue...*, p. 1206 (Rosen-Forshall originally dated it to the 13th century).

(2) See ROSEN-FORSHALL, *Catalogus*..I, no XLIX (the Letter to Publius is item no 48 in the manuscript).

back to the Diatessaron. The passage in our letter also contains a particularly interesting interpretation of Luke 16:25. Here the Greek is normally translated "and now he is *comforted*, and you are in anguish", but in the letter the Greek verb *parakaleitai* is taken in the quite different sense of "he is besought" (equally legitimate as far as the Greek is concerned). The passage in question reads: (Abraham speaks)

> "My son, remember that you received your good things and your luxuries during your life time, while Lazarus formerly received pain and affliction; and now he is unable to come to help you in your torments, because you did not come to his help when he was tormented in sickness. For this reason *you are asking him* to help you, just as he used to ask you to help him — but you refused; and he is unable to come because of the great impassible pit that separates us so that no one from you can come to us, and none from us can come to you." (§4)(8).

Exactly the same understanding of the Gospel passage is to be found in Aphrahat's 20th Demonstration, which reads:

> "My son, recall that you received your good things during your life time, while Lazarus received his evil things; but to-day *you are asking him* and he does not help you." (9)

Burkitt reasonably enough concluded from this coincidence in interpretation that Ephrem and Afrahat are both simply following the Diatessaron's understanding of the passage.

The first extract from the letter ends with an exhoration to Publius that he "gaze with the eye of his mind" on the day of judgement and on the terror of those about to be judged.

The second, and longer, extract is introduced by the rubric "a little further on", and opens with an invitation to contemplate Christ enthroned on the day of judgement; it seems unlikely that very much has been left out at this point by the excerptor. There now follows a magnificent list of descriptions and titles of Christ, with the contrasting features of the paradox of the Incarnation artistically balanced:

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(8) The Syriac text is given by BURKITT, p. 71 (but with two misreadings of the manuscript in the first line: read ܕܡܬܚܙܐ for ܪܡܬܚܙܐ , and ܕܡܘܟܚܐ for ܕܡܫܠܐ).

(9) See note 6.

> ...Look at Christ who is near to the Father, yet at the same time far from him,
> at him who is mingled with the Father, yet distinct from him,
> who is with him, and is not distant, at his right hand, and not far off,
> who shares his throne, and not as an alien; the gate of salvation, the way of truth, the propitiatory lamb, the purificatory sacrifice, the priest who removes guilt, the purifying sprinkling, the creator of actions, the fashioner and establisher, the moulder of creatures who gives feeling to dust, clothing earth with perception, giving movement to all flesh, making distinct the places of every species, transforming innumerable faces, renewing the minds of all generations, he sows all kinds of wisdom in all things. (§ 6)

This lengthy recounting of Christ's titles, "which surpass what the world can reckon", ends up with Christ's own exhortation to the sheep on his right hand to "come and inherit the kingdom" (Matthew 25:34), and he thanks them

> for having fed him when he was hungry — in the person of the poor,
> for having given him to drink when he was thirsty — in the person of the ill-treated,
> for having clothed him when he was naked — in the person of the destitute,
> for having visited him when he was in prison — in the person of prisoners,
> for having taken him in when he was a stranger — in the person of foreigners,
> for having visited him when he was ill — in the person of the sick.
> And when they did not acknowledge before him their good works, those excellent works, which were depicted on their limbs, themselves cried out on their behalf and gave their testimony; and like excellent fruit on deligtful trees they festooned them and hung like clusters, in order to testify the truth concerning those who had performed these deeds. (§ 8).

In a very striking passage Ephrem goes on to explain how, before Christ the righteous judge, it is men's own good or wicked deeds which act as their advocates or accusers:

> For just as the actions of the wicked accuse the wicked before the righteous judge, making them bend double and hold down their head in shame and silence, in the same way the excellent deeds of the good make their defence before him who is Good. For the deeds of all mankind are at once silent and eloquent — silent by their nature, but eloquent

> when one looks at them. For there are no questions asked there, since the judge has full knowledge, nor are there any replies, for he hears by what he sees. (§9)

The language of 'left' and 'right', and of 'sheep' and 'goats', is purely metaphorical:

> Not that there really is a right or a left there, but these are just the terms that we use... we call the good 'sheep', because of their humility, and we call the wicked 'goats' because of their obstinacy; we call Christ's justice 'scales', and his reward to us 'the measure of justice'. (§9)

The image of the mirror is picked up again, and Ephrem gives a further description of what the discerning mind is able to see in it, telling how his own eye falls upon the wise and foolish virgins (Mt 25:1ff); he himself is led to lament that, like the foolish virgins, he was "empty of the works of the blessed (baptismal) oil" (§13). In the foolish virgins he sees those who had merely taken shelter in the name of Christian, but had omitted to adorn themselves with "the good oil of excellent works" (§15).

Out of the mirror's mouth Ephrem next hears the words of Luke 12:16-20, about the fate of the Rich Fool who thought he had stored up a sufficiency of this world's goods to "eat and drink, take his rest and pleasure, having vast crops stored up to last for many years" (§16). The moral of the parable should be obvious to Publius, whom Ephrem now invites to "hold in awe his (baptismal) seal" (§17), and to consider to vanity of mankind, reduced to dust, whatever their rank:

> Where are the kings with their garments, their crowns and their purple?
> Where are their powers and their wars, their arms and assemblies, their wealth and their treasures?
> Look at their spears lying broken, at their bows unstrung, at their swords rusted, at their weapons decayed,
> —generations which have removed and passed on, the thread of their lives shrivelled up like the home of worms at their death, and like a warp ready to be cut off (the loom), they suffer the destruction of uprooting (cp Isaiah 38:12). (§19)

The mind's eye then passes from the gloomy picture of the scenes in Gehenna to the joys of Eden, across the chasm. The blessed are able to see over this chasm to Gehenna, but there is no sense of gloating here:

> The vision of the eye is permitted to come and go, giving pain or joy to either side: the good regard their own lot as all the better when they see the wicked, and they rejoice all the more in this lot, while the wicked see themselves the more condemned, and their pain is increased. (§21)

In what is perhaps the most remarkable paragraph in the whole letter Ephrem ponders on what Gehenna really means, once stripped of the images given to it by the language of metaphor:

> Maybe it is that the Gehenna of the wicked consists in what they see and it is their very separation that burns them, their own mind acting as the flame. The hidden judge who is seated in the understanding mind has spoken and has become for them the righteous judge who beats them without mercy with the torments of contrition. Perhaps it is this that separates men out, sending each to the appropriate place; perhaps it is this which grasps the good with its right hand stretched out, sending them to that right hand of mercy; and it again which takes the wicked in its just left hand, casting them into the place called 'the left'; maybe it is this which quietly accuses them, and silently pronounces sentence upon them. (§22)

The letter ends with Ephrem describing how he is so overawed by all that he has seen in the mirror of the Gospel that the only thing he finds that he can do is to "take refuge in penitence and shelter under the wings of repentance" (§24). The final short paragraph brings the whole meditation to a close:

> This, then, is what I saw in that eloquent and living mirror, in which the images of all the actions of mankind quiver, from Adam up to the day of the just judgement. And what I heard from the blessed voice that was audible from inside the mirror, I have recorded in this letter, my beloved brother. (§25)

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The above extracts will, it is hoped, give some sort of indication of the richness of thought and artistry of language to be found in this letter to Publius. Whether or not it is genuinely Ephrem's (and at present I see no convincing arguments against its authenticity), the Letter to Publius represents an important document of the early Syriac-speaking church from at least three different points of view. First of all it is important for

its detailed picture of the last judgement and in particular for its understanding — remarkably modern in some ways — of the nature of Gehenna; secondly there is the long list, running to some three paragraphs, of christological titles, which should be viewed against the background of the Arian controversy; and thirdly, this Letter, with its artistic prose, constitutes an excellent example of early Syriac rhetoric. Syriac rhetoric is a subject that has been almost completely neglected by the historians of Syriac literature (10), and so it is worth dwelling upon it briefly. Anyone who reads carefully through, say, this Letter, Aphrahat's 6th Demonstration, and the lives of some of the early Persian martyrs (11), will soon see that the art of *kunstprosa* was just as much cultivated by native Syriac writers as it was by their Greek contemporaries. The existence of this native rhetorical tradition among early Syriac writers has hitherto been virtually overlooked, and the time would seem to be ripe for a proper investigation of its nature, and its relationship to Greek rhetoric.

(10) An exception is L. HAEFELI, *Stilmittel bei Afrahat, dem persischen Weise* (1932).

(11) Cp my remarks in *J.T.S.* ns XIX (1968), p. 304 with note 2.